

Experiential Learning and Social Justice Action: An Experiment in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

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Abstract. *This essay discusses the process and findings of an experiment on the scholarship of teaching and learning conducted in a religious ethics classroom that utilized an experiential approach to teaching and learning about social justice. The first part lays out the focus of the investigation and the pedagogical principles drawn from experiential learning theory that provided the foundation for the experiment. The second part describes all of the components of the pedagogical strategy used in the experiment, the social justice action project. The third part discusses the qualitative methodology used to gather evidence and the findings drawn from that evidence. What the evidence shows is that an experiential approach to teaching and learning about social justice can be quite effective. The essay concludes with discussions of areas for further study and the implications for the practice of others. (The index described in this article can be found on the Wabash Center Web site <<http://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/journal/glennon.html>>).*

Introduction

Imagine that you are teaching an upper-level core curriculum course in religious ethics and one of the goals of that core curriculum is to promote an active commitment to social justice and community service on the part of all students. Let us assume that you felt this an appropriate goal for your curriculum – an assumption some who teach religious studies do not share (see Glennon 2002) – and that you had some idea of what “an active commitment” means. How would you meet that goal? What pedagogical objectives and strategies would you use to facilitate student achievement of this goal? What pedagogical assumptions would underlie your choice of strategies?

Now imagine that you are a participant in the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) and that you have made a commitment to research the effectiveness of your efforts to enable students to learn more deeply about social justice. What evidence would you provide to demonstrate your success (or failure) in facilitating such learning? What research methodologies or protocols would you use to gather such evidence?

This is my situation. I teach such an upper-level religious ethics course in which I use a particular pedagogical strategy to meet the goal of promoting an active commitment to social justice among my students. The strategy has two objectives: to help students develop a more sophisticated understanding of social justice; and to help students develop a stronger sense of themselves as moral agents. I am also a Carnegie Scholar (2001–2002) and the teaching and learning about social justice that takes place in my classroom has become a focus of my scholarly pursuits, which means employing research methods, gathering evidence, and making that research public and available for peer review.

I write this essay to make public this classroom practice and research with a two-fold purpose in mind. First, by discussing in detail the pedagogical strategies (and their assumptions) I used successfully to enable students to develop their commitment to social justice, I hope to demonstrate the promise of experiential learning approaches to teaching and learning about social justice. Second, by laying out the research methodology used to gather evidence about student learning and by providing an analysis of that evidence, I want to advocate the importance of making the teaching-learning environment in religious studies and theology classrooms a part of our scholarly pursuits.

Focus of the Investigation

Like many who teach religious studies and theology, I use a pedagogical approach that empowers students to learn by developing a classroom environment that promotes freedom, democracy, and responsibility (see Glennon 1995 and 1999). Over the years, this has led me to use active learning strategies based on the assumption that students who actively engage their education learn better than those who undergo a more traditional, passive approach. But active learning is a broad umbrella. It covers such pedagogical strategies as cooperative learning, independent learning contracts, role-playing, discussion groups, and the like – all of which I employ. Are particular forms of active learning more appropriate for learning about social justice?

When Parker Palmer visited my campus a few years ago he argued (in a workshop and in his book, *The Courage To Teach*) that there is an intricate connection between epistemology, pedagogy, and ethics. The relationship of the knower to the known becomes the basis for the relationship of the actor to the world. While this may not be a new idea, hearing it again led me to rethink my approach to teaching and learning about social justice. Are active learning strategies in the classroom sufficient in teaching about social justice? While these move students a step closer to the real world, they often do not go far enough. Students do not experience social justice concerns firsthand, nor do they do any action to address these concerns. As I looked back on my own learning about social justice, I realized it was my experiences of social injustice and my work to promote justice in poor neighborhoods in Atlanta that served me best. And I recalled that involving high school, college, and seminary students in these communities and having them reflect on their experiences enabled me to teach (and them to learn) more about social justice than could have happened in the classroom alone.

I read more deeply into the literature on experiential learning, starting with service learning and then to other theoretical accounts of experiential learning: reading Freire (again), Ira Shor, bell hooks, David Kolb, Jean Piaget, and back to John Dewey. What I discovered is that experiential education at its heart draws from Dewey's contention, "An ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory simply because it is only in experience that any theory has vital and verifiable significance" (1966, 144). But it isn't just any experience. The experience has to be significant in ways that are fruitful for further learning. In the essay, "Foundations of Experiential Learning," members of the National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE) speak about authentic experience. "In an authentic experience, the learner recognizes that learning is relevant and that her/his own knowledge gives her/him power to affect her/his world" (1997).

What kind of experience generates this knowledge? According to Piaget, "Knowledge is derived from action. . . . To know an object is to act upon it and to transform it" (1979, 28–29). Similarly, Ira Shor contends, "action is essential to gain knowledge and develop intelligence" (1992, 17). What kind of actions are the most authentic and appropriate for meeting the goal of promoting an active commitment to social justice on the part of my students?

This reading and reflection led me to formulate two hypotheses. First, an experiential pedagogical approach to social justice will engage students deeply with what they learn and will contribute to their development as persons who demonstrate a commitment for the common good regardless of their chosen profession (part of the core emphasis at my institution). Second, any lasting learning of ethics, especially about social justice, is best achieved through concrete action, acting on one's view of social justice, and reflection on that action, not through abstract reflection alone. The focus of my investigation, therefore, was to test these hypotheses. Would students learn deeply about social justice and develop an active commitment to social justice in a context in which they engage experientially in social justice action and reflection?

Pedagogical Principles

Rather than bore the reader with a review of the literature on experiential learning I researched, I will enumerate and discuss briefly six pedagogical principles/assumptions I draw from that literature that influenced my decision to experiment with the pedagogical approach I developed, the Social Justice Action Project. I will then spend most of the remaining essay discussing that project and the findings from that research.

First, all education is value-laden and political. Some of my colleagues question my active (they claim activist) approach to teaching about social justice (especially in light of my decision to engage in a social justice action project myself). To them, this approach smacks of indoctrination rather than the enlightenment a liberal view of education seeks to embody. Yet the values of neutrality and objectivity (and, I would argue, passivity) espoused by some are no less politically laden (see Freire 1985). I agree with Ira Shor's assessment of higher education's potential: "Education has the potential to orient students toward questioning the status quo, to develop their historical imagination of alternatives and their social activism in favor of changing the system currently in place" (Shor 2000, 8). If I can get my students to think and act along these lines, then I feel I will have met my responsibility as an educator.

Second, learning about social justice must begin with students' prior learning and experiences. In his challenge

to more traditional approaches to education, Dewey argues that education ought to begin with experience, a “felt problem” close at hand in thought, action, affect, rather than beginning with the academic (Dewey 1997, 25). My experience over the past decade of teaching affirms Dewey’s contention. Students have engaged the teaching-learning process more fully whenever I tie their prior learning or past experiences with the subject matter at hand. For example, having students talk about or write about an experience in which they were treated unfairly has enabled them to connect better to stories and essays about the unfair treatment of others. David Kolb develops this notion further when he writes, “all learning is relearning.” What he means is that every learner enters into a learning experience with some experiences and knowledge already there. “Thus, one’s job as an educator is not only to implant new ideas but also to dispose of or modify old ones. In many cases, resistance to new ideas stems from their conflict with old beliefs that are inconsistent with them. If the education process begins by bringing out the learner’s beliefs and theories, examining and testing them, and then integrating the new, more refined ideas into the person’s belief systems, the learning process will be facilitated” (Kolb 1984, 28). My students already had some understanding of social justice or injustice. By bringing their views to light and by pushing them to examine their views in the context of specific social injustices, I hoped to lead them to develop their views more fully.

Third, when it comes to social justice active learning is better than passive learning; doing is better than receiving. Dewey contends that the best learning takes place when students are given something to do, not something to learn (Dewey 1966, 154). Ira Shor affirms Dewey’s insight when he argues that students should “experience education as something *they* do rather than as something done to them” (Shor 1992, 85). Over the years, I have discovered that those students who have done some community service or social justice action in the past appear better able to understand notions of social justice taught in the classroom more clearly. Even in this experiment, the nine students (out of sixty) who had a better understanding of social justice from the start all had either experienced injustice or had worked to address some injustice in the past. Those students without such experience had less developed understandings of social justice at the beginning. Yet most were able to deepen their understandings as a result of the research, action, and reflection in which they engaged.

Fourth, the quality of the experience is critical to the learning that takes place. All education provides experiences, whether they are experiences with a text or in a classroom setting. Dewey recognizes, however, that not all experiences are educational. Some have the opposite effect. “Any experience is mis-educative that

has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience” (Dewey 1997, 25). I am reminded of this truth each year when students speak negatively about all welfare recipients because they had the experience of encountering a welfare cheater or a lazy person on welfare. Thus, Dewey emphasizes the quality of experience. “Hence the central problem of education based upon experience is to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences” (1997, 27–28). Developing such quality experiences places a tremendous responsibility on the teacher. Yet, as recent research on effective service learning – which illustrates a strong connection between learning and the settings where students have quality experiences – demonstrates, the assumption of this responsibility is well worth it (Eyler and Giles 1999).

Fifth, in teaching and learning about social justice, the learner should be actively involved in shaping the purpose and direction of the learning that takes place. Dewey contends, “Setting up conditions which stimulate certain visible and tangible ways of acting is the first step. Making the individual a sharer or partner in the associated activity so that he feels its success as his success, its failure as his failure, is the completing step” (Dewey 1966, 14). As someone who teaches required courses, I have long seen the importance of getting students to take responsibility for their learning if that learning is going to be meaningful (see Glennon 1995). This is especially true if one attempts to construct a teaching-learning environment that is democratic and participatory. Learning information and skills is more significant when students are able to make meaningful connections with their own goals and interests. This happens best when they become a partner in that learning by having the freedom and responsibility to determine how that learning will take place. That is why in this social justice project I did not dictate what students should do, the type of social justice actions they should engage in. Rather they were free to determine which actions were appropriate in light of their values and commitments.

Sixth, in the case of teaching and learning about social justice, a praxis (action-reflection) model provides a more qualitative experience for learning about social justice than reading about social justice. Freire writes, “When a word is deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers as well; and the word is changed into idle chatter, into verbalism, into an alienated and alienating ‘blah.’ It becomes an empty word, one which cannot denounce the world, for denunciation is impossible without a commitment to transform, and there is no transformation without action” (Freire 1970, 75). One could argue that this is true of the word “justice.” Without action for justice reflections about justice become *blah*, ideas that students can regurgitate

on a test or essay but which make very little claim on their lives. Acting for justice deepens their learning by making ideas about justice and injustice concrete, forcing students to reflect on the responses people and institutions have to their actions. Moreover, acting for justice now enhances their skills to act for justice in the future.

Description of Project

The pedagogical approach I used to test my hypotheses and to embody the learning goal was to engage students in a Social Justice Action Project in my senior seminar, *Ethics from the Perspective of the Oppressed*. The project was a significant part of the students' workload in the course, accounting for 50–75 percent of the final grade. The project had three objectives. First, the students had to identify and act upon at least one social justice issue. To embody the principles of using prior learning and having students become actively involved in shaping the purpose and direction of their learning, I encouraged them to think of something they find to be unjust in the world and to identify particular actions that would address that injustice. Karen Lebacqz argues that, while many people may not know what justice is, they do have an intuitive sense of what injustice is (Lebacqz 1989, chap. 1). By starting with what they knew, injustice, I hoped to develop their sense of justice.

Second, I wanted students to develop a more sophisticated understanding of social justice, which I defined as the ability to recognize and discuss the systemic, institutional, and structural elements of injustice and justice. Most students (85 percent, 51 out of 60) initially identified social justice in interpersonal terms: people should be fair to each other. The definition provided by Jen Karedas (student-chosen alias) was typical. She defined social justice as a virtue of the individual. "By not discriminating against others and helping others at times, I am a socially just person." While the virtue of justice is important, she and most students do not have a strong sense of the systemic, structural, or institutional reasons for the existence of injustices, or what a society must do to work to eliminate them, or even their impact on the development of just persons. My hope was that engaging in social justice action and reflection would enable her and other students to develop this broader view.

Third, I wanted students to develop a stronger sense of themselves as moral agents. My experience with students is that once they learn about injustice in society, they become frustrated, seeing the problem as too big. Susie Q's comment exemplifies this concern: "I may be pessimistic but social justice is going to be difficult to achieve." Many students throw their hands in the air and think there is nothing they can do. Karen confesses, "Currently I do not do anything to fight injustice because in so many ways I feel overwhelmed by the

sheer magnitude of the injustice that exists today." By having students act upon a social justice issue in some small way, I hoped to help them see that they can be moral agents for justice. This project had several components. First, students wrote two- to three-page essays at the beginning of class that discussed their views of social justice at the time. These were not graded but were used as a basis for comparison when they reflected on their view of social justice at the end of the project. Second, I had students complete a social location exercise. The purpose of this exercise was to get students in touch with their own racial, class, gender, religious, political, and familial backgrounds and perspectives. In addition, students were asked to describe the kinds of social and political activities they had been involved in. One reason for this is to see if prior experiences had any influence on their views. Third, students had to identify a social justice issue that they wanted to focus their research and action upon during the project. Students were free to determine what these would be. I provided broad suggestions if asked, but I wanted them to identify an issue they were particularly concerned about, thus making them partners in the learning process. Fourth, students had to research the injustice and identify actions they could do to address that injustice. Some examples of injustice the students identified included domestic violence, child abuse, poverty wages, welfare, homelessness, affordable housing, and the inequality of resources between urban and suburban schools. Some examples of actions included advocacy with legislators, teach-ins, simulations, petitions, volunteer service, and book drives. Students were required to do a minimum of 10 hours of action (this did not include time spent on the research or writing). Fifth, students had to reflect on their projects through presentations in class, research papers, and reflection papers. The goal of these activities was to enable them to make connections between their actions and their effect on their views of social justice and of themselves as moral agents.

Evidence Gathered and Findings

Of course, the scholarship of teaching and learning requires that a teacher-scholar gather evidence about whether or not such learning is taking place. Given the nature of the project, I used a qualitative research methodology to gather evidence about student learning. First, because classroom research involves research on human subjects, I submitted my project to the College's Institutional Review Board for their review and expedited approval. Making my research public involves revealing information that students share. I requested and received written permission from students to use their course work for research purposes, including excerpts, examples and portions of their coursework. To protect student confidentiality, I assured students that

none of the written material would be identified with individuals. To that end, students developed their own aliases to protect their identities.

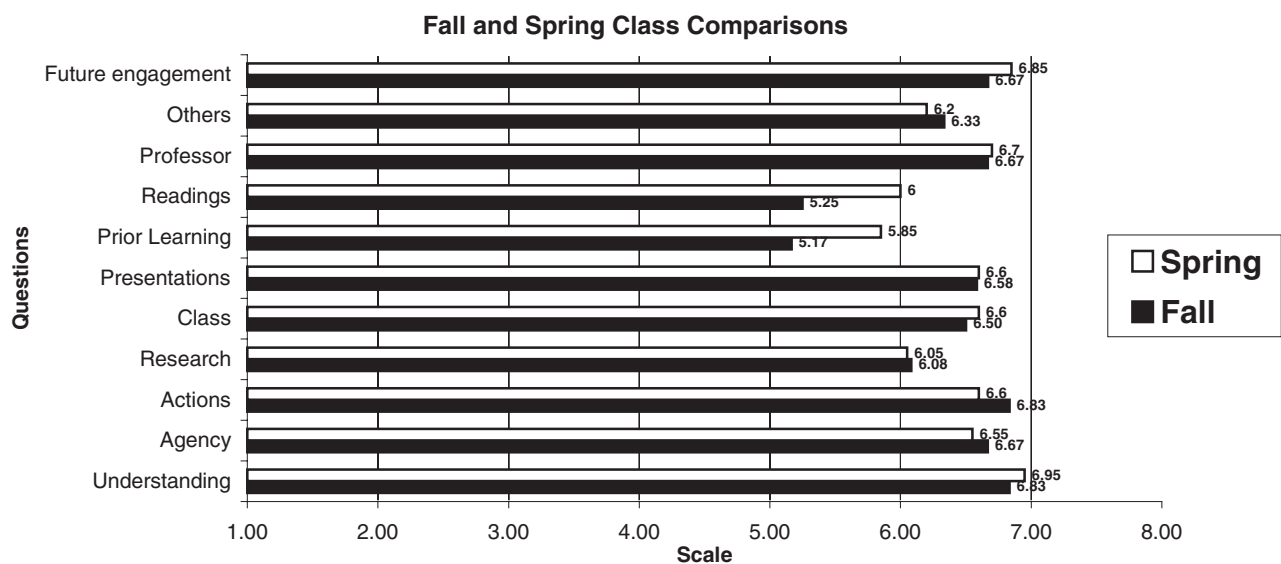
Initially, the primary evidence I gathered came from oral and written presentations by the students. I compared the early papers students wrote on social justice to later views as they developed through the semester in their presentations, formal papers on their projects, and final reflection papers. I looked for evidence that students had developed a more sophisticated understanding of social justice (as defined above). Two months after teaching the course the first time, my Carnegie colleagues on the scholarship of teaching and learning brought to my attention that the “experiences” the students would have in this project would be more than just the actions they took. The research, the class presentations, the discussions with professors, peers, and others, were all experiences that I included in the project. They pushed me to find some ways to measure which experiences were most influential. In response, I developed a survey (see appendix 1) that asked students to rate how well the project had enabled them to meet the goals of the project and to rate the influence each component had. I distributed these surveys to the fall class four months after the class had ended and to the spring class on the last day of class. I received 22 (of the 40 distributed) surveys from the fall class and 20 (out of 20) from the spring class.

In the vast majority of cases, the two primary learning goals of the project were met. As the following graph from the surveys demonstrates, students from the fall and spring classes report that their completion of the social justice action project helped them greatly to develop a more sophisticated understanding of social justice (6.83 and 6.95 respectively on a scale of 1–8; 1 = Not at all, 8 = Greatly) and helped them to develop a

stronger sense of themselves as moral agents (6.67 and 6.55 respectively). The surveys indicate some other interesting results. One half of the students from the fall class reported that they were still engaged in their social justice action in some way after four months. Moreover, students from both classes overwhelmingly reported that their experience in the social justice action project would lead them to engage in similar social justice actions in the future (6.67 and 6.85 respectively). These results indicate that this project has the potential to contribute to the core curriculum’s goal of enabling students to demonstrate an active commitment to social justice and community service.

The surveys also support the notion suggested by my Carnegie colleagues that the “experiences” that make up the project include more than the actions and that each of these has some influence on the learning that takes place. The students report that, while the actions were very influential in helping them to achieve the goals of the project (6.83, 6.6), so were the research they did (6.08, 6.05), the class presentations they made (6.58, 6.6), and the discussions with the professor and others (6.67, 6.7; 6.33, 6.2) about their social justice projects. These results reinforce the pedagogical principles stated previously: all experiences can be educative especially if they are connected to a praxis (action-reflection) model that provides the qualitative experience necessary for learning about social justice.

The least influential factor is their prior learning (5.17, 5.85). The comments on the surveys suggest some reasons for this. Many students felt that they did not have many prior experiences in social justice (my analysis of their social location exercises affirms this realization). They also commented that their prior courses at Le Moyne did not incorporate much reading or reflection on social justice. This is an interesting commentary



on a core curriculum one of whose goals is to help students demonstrate an active commitment to social justice.

While self-reporting is an important component in a qualitative research methodology, I also used document analysis, reviewing final self-reflection papers and comparing earlier written views of social justice with later views expressed in research and reflection papers, to see how well students met the objectives of the project. In most cases, the views expressed in the documents were consistent with those in the surveys. First, 85 percent of students (51 out of 60) report some change in their thinking about social justice; for most, the change was significant. Sara, responding to the treatment of physically and emotionally challenged persons, realizes: "After reviewing my previous thoughts on social justice in our first reflection paper, I have come to the conclusion that I really did not have any idea what I was talking about when I wrote it." Similarly, Anna, advocating for living wages, writes: "At the beginning of the semester I had vague ideas and beliefs regarding social justice but through class discussions and specifically the action project I have gained greater insight into this concept." Ira, exploring the effects of poverty, concludes: "This project helped me to focus on the cause of the problem rather than the problem itself." Nicki, looking at the inequality in school funding, writes: "I never really paid attention to the poor and underprivileged. I thought they were someone else's problem. Before I chose this topic I think my subconscious opinion was that people are what they are because that is what they have or have not worked for. But it did not make sense for the children that were born into unfortunate circumstances. If children are not given at least the chance to succeed then it is not their fault that they repeat the cycle, it is society's fault."

Second, my document analysis revealed that 70 percent of students (36 out of 51 who initially had a narrow view of social justice) were able to demonstrate a more sophisticated understanding of social justice by incorporating systemic, institutional, and structural elements into their views. (Even those students who had some sophistication in their understanding of social justice at the beginning demonstrated development in their thinking.) Trisha initially felt that social justice was "when people in society have some compassion toward other people's situations." As a result of her research and action on a living wage campaign, she indicates that "social justice arranges structures and institutions that assert the premise that all human beings are to be respected; social justice . . . sets up the institutions in such a way that these values of dignity and respect can be promoted and preserved." Tim, working on the issue of domestic violence, writes: "At the start of the year you asked us to define social justice. Not being well rounded on the subject, I defined social justice as a set

of universal principles that guide human beings in judging what is right and wrong no matter what culture or society they live in. While some of this might be valid, it doesn't give a true meaning to what social justice really is. The definition is much too vague. Issues of marginalization, gender, power, and money are just some problems surrounding social justice. The ones with the money and the power make all the rules while the people without them live by them. I had always thought that equality was a part of social justice. What I never gave much thought to, until now, was that if you were not of a specific gender, class, and race it made it that much harder to achieve equality." Alex, who also worked on a living wage campaign, acknowledges the new connections he sees: "Only a small minority of the population obtains a college education; what about the rest of the population that does not receive a college education? Do they deserve a decent standard of living? Before this project I would have answered no, but now I have a better understanding of social justice. I realize that a person's wage should not be linked with the value of the work but with the cost of a decent standard of living."

Finally, 80 percent of students (48 out of 60) voiced that, as a result of their participation in this project, their sense of their own moral agency has strengthened. Karen says, "This class has awakened the activist inside of me, woe to the people in power." Woody writes, "I find it hard to believe that it takes people like myself so long to open their eyes to the world of social injustice. We can do so many great things as individuals in this society." Alex notes, "I am more aware now that I am in a position to advocate for the rights of others." Jenna confesses, "I used to believe that I was one person who could not make a difference. Homelessness is such a large problem. Through my work with Habitat for Humanity, I saw how much a group of individuals could get done, even in just one day." Hester comments, "I have been awakened to the severity of injustice that goes on in front of our eyes. I am both outraged at the information that I have gained and happy that I now know and can work in the fight towards positive change." Tony declares, "The most important thing that I learned from this project . . . was the realization that I am needed much more in the city schools than in the suburban school. I am looking forward to continuing this social justice project each and every day of my life."

Areas for Further Study

From my analysis of the surveys and the documents, it became clear that this experiential learning project was successful for the vast majority of students in meeting its objectives. Yet the research and the experiment also raised several issues that deserve further study. First, more exploration should be done on the correlation

between prior social justice experiences and the level of learning. The social location exercise enabled me to identify those students who had prior social justice experiences. While I did see some progression in the notion of social justice held by the nine students with prior social justice experiences, it would be helpful to have some way to discern how much learning took place.

Second, a longitudinal study of students engaged in the project would help to see the long-term impact of participation in social justice action. Data from the surveys indicate that half of the students from the fall class still participated in their social justice action four months after the class ended. Moreover, the students from both semesters indicated that they felt the project would make a significant impact in their future participation in social justice actions. A longitudinal study would help to see how accurate those self-perceptions are.

Third, it would be useful to explore earlier applications of social justice action projects in the core curriculum rather than wait until students are seniors. Many students indicated that their earlier coursework in the core provided little in the way of social justice education. Knowing the faculty and the courses they were likely to take, I suspect that they had forgotten how much they had read on issues of social justice. Yet their perceptions do suggest that an experiential approach to learning about social justice may make a more lasting impact. Having comparative data from earlier and later years would enable the institution to see how well the goal of promoting an active commitment to social justice was being met.

Finally, additional assessment tools could be developed to measure the impact this project had on student understandings of social justice. This is not a challenge to the validity of the qualitative assessment tools I used in my research. Yet I recognize their limits. One additional qualitative assessment tool might be to have other faculty members who have expertise on social justice read earlier and later papers to measure the development in student thinking on social justice. This would reduce the level of bias all researchers inherently bring, thus making the document analysis more objective. The problem, of course, is that such assessment is labor intensive and would require a commitment on the part of the institution to invest in such assessment measures. Further, these additional assessment tools could be used to discern why some students were unable to develop a more sophisticated notion of justice. I have spoken with some students who did not meet this objective about the reasons for it. A few, especially those who had to work long hours to pay for their education, indicated that they did not have the time to invest in the project. Some others said they did not want to do the project at all and so invested little effort into it. A couple of students

told me that they had a difficult time deciding what they wanted to do. Assessment measures that provided clearer understandings of student successes and difficulties could enable the professor to improve the pedagogical methods employed for student learning.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have provided evidence for an experiential approach to teaching and learning about social justice. The success of this approach has been echoed in the sentiments expressed in almost all cases by the students. They felt that this project, which required research, action, and reflection, enabled them to understand injustice and social justice in ways they might not have before. Moreover, they speak eloquently of the way in which their action in this issue empowered their own sense of themselves as moral agents, capable of addressing social justice issues now and in the future. Mae summarizes the sentiments of many when she writes, "Thank you for focusing your class on something outside of books and homework. This action taught me a lot. I benefited more from this action than I could have possibly with any class work." This is powerful testimony to the possibilities of an experiential approach to learning about social justice.

What do the findings from this experiment suggest for the practice of others? First, it is important, dare I say morally obligatory, to do classroom research on the learning goals of a core curriculum to provide a body of evidence that demonstrates the curriculum is meeting its objectives (see Glennon 1999, for a full treatment of my argument on the ethics of outcomes assessment). In an era of outcomes assessment, we can no longer assume that our curriculum reaches its goals. Second, like research on the impact of service learning (Eyler and Giles 1999), an action-reflection project that is integrated well into the course can have positive learning outcomes for students. Third, faculty interested in engaging students more deeply in social justice issues should consider strongly the significance of experiential learning that incorporates action and reflection as a pedagogical tool. As my students indicate repeatedly, their active engagement with the social justice issue was key to the significant learning they experienced. In the words of Vanessa, "I think that taking an active role in the quest for social justice really helped to solidify my notion of justice."

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